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Politburo Meetings Under Andropov



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An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
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**Politburo Meetings
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Key Judgments*Information available
as of 27 April 1983
was used in this report.*

The new practice of publicizing the agendas of Politburo meetings has enhanced the image of the Andropov regime and provided a unique, if heavily censored, glimpse of the regime's decisionmaking process and policy priorities. The decision to publish the agendas probably was intended to counter the image of leadership inaction associated with Brezhnev's declining years and to provide a new channel for communicating Politburo concerns to domestic and foreign audiences. Although the new practice bears the mark of Konstantin Chernenko, Andropov's unofficial second secretary and onetime rival for Brezhnev's post, Andropov has clearly profited from the impression the agendas have conveyed of increased leadership vigor and responsiveness to popular concerns.

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Despite the new "openness," Soviet leaders have placed strict limits on the degree of disclosure permitted in these communiqués. Sensitive discussions—particularly in the foreign policy area—are reported in vague terms, if at all, and even the attendees at these meetings are not identified unless they have given "reports."

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Given these caveats, however, a review of the meetings held thus far suggests little alteration in the priorities established under Brezhnev. Agricultural issues dominate the domestic agendas—perhaps even more than they did in the previous regime. Foreign policy concerns, for the most part, also appear to be carryovers. For example, the Brezhnev regime's increased attention to Eastern Europe in the wake of the Polish crisis has continued; East European issues are still predominant on the foreign policy agenda. Ranking second in frequency of discussion have been strategic issues and relations with Western Europe—concerns that also dominated the later years of the Brezhnev regime, particularly as the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Western Europe became more imminent.

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Despite these similarities, the agendas indicate that Andropov is placing far more emphasis on accountability and on the implementation of policies, some of which appeared to be floundering under Brezhnev. Since Andropov's accession, Politburo discussions

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have been followed by a number of decisive actions, ranging from alterations in the operating hours of consumer services to personnel changes and reorganizations. As a result, some Brezhnev policies that appeared to be in trouble, such as the reorganization of the agro-industrial sector, now have a better prognosis. [REDACTED]

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In sum, Andropov has clearly been attacking longstanding problems with new vigor [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The agendas thus far, however, suggest that the emphasis remains more on effective implementation of existing policies than on new policy directions. Major initiatives, when they occur, could well become known first through this new channel of Politburo communication with the outside world. Until then, Soviet leaders will be able to use publication of the proceedings both to communicate the regime's attentiveness to popular concerns and to mobilize the forces needed to carry out its programs. [REDACTED]

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The New Image

Although continuity was the watchword in statements issued after Brezhnev's death, the new regime undoubtedly was eager to shed the image of leadership inaction that was associated with Brezhnev's declining years. The practice of publicizing Politburo agendas, instituted on 10 December 1982, has helped portray a leadership actively engaging a wide range of problems, including those most relevant to the average citizen, and has provided a new vehicle for communicating Politburo concerns, both at home and abroad. In doing so, it has also—in the words of one Soviet official—"clipped the wings of tradition." Although abbreviated versions of the Politburo's annual work schedule have appeared in the past (in 1926 and 1928), this is the first time that agendas have been published after every regular session.¹

Politburo Agendas and Policy Priorities

The published agenda of a Politburo meeting obviously is not a complete record of the topics discussed and does not include politically sensitive items (in some cases the accounts have acknowledged that "other" subjects were covered). Politburo discussions of personnel matters, for example, have been reported in only the most cryptic terms. The accounts thus far have mentioned such matters only twice—once in relation to problems resulting from the displacement of officials in the agro-industrial reorganization and again when the Politburo discussed unspecified "questions" about the "growth and consolidation of party ranks."

Explicit personnel actions have never been cited. Although Foreign Minister Gromyko's promotion to First Deputy Premier was announced after the Politburo meeting of 24 March, it was not listed on the Politburo's published agenda, presumably to maintain the fiction that such top government assignments are made independently by the Presidium of the Supreme

¹ The practice of publicizing agendas also has been adopted by the Republic Party Bureaus in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Belorussia.



Politburo meetings are held in the domed Council of Ministers building pictured above. Despite the new "openness," no pictures of the Politburo in session have been released.

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We do not know what percentage of items go unreported in the published agenda and have no solid evidence about the total number of topics usually considered at Politburo sessions.

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Figure 1
Issues on Politburo Agenda^a

Number of times discussed

Foreign

Eastern Europe

Western Europe

Strategic Issues

Third World

UN

Domestic

Agriculture

Consumer Services

Housing

Economic
Management

Energy

Transportation

0 5 10 15

^a 9 December 1982–21 April 1983.

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Foreign Policy. Of the agenda items reported thus far, roughly half have dealt with foreign policy. Although the brevity of these accounts provides few clues about the substance of the discussions, the frequency of appearance of various topics probably is indicative both of messages the leadership wishes to convey and genuine Politburo concerns. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the foreign policy realm, East European issues appear most frequently (see figure 1). Although this predominance reflects the high rate of official Soviet–East European contacts, it may also be intended to convey to East European leaders the intensity of Politburo scrutiny of such matters.

Ranking second in frequency have been discussions of strategic issues and relations with Western Europe—interrelated topics that have received about equal attention. The Politburo's emphasis on strategic issues is not new, but almost certainly has been increased by its concern over the prospect of an enhanced US strategic challenge; this concern has been clearly evident since the latter years of the Brezhnev regime in its stepped-up effort to curb new US arms programs and to prevent or delay deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). The focus on Western Europe reflects Politburo preoccupation with the INF issue as well as a broader effort to improve Soviet relations in that area—not only for the political and economic benefits they provide, but also as a means of exploiting differences between the United States and its NATO Allies.

The agenda communiques suggest that Third World issues ranked next on the Politburo's list of priorities. Although the less frequent appearance of such topics could simply reflect their sensitivity, this does not appear to be the case. The record does include references to talks with Third World leaders, for

example, and on one occasion a discussion of “increased economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation” with Asian and African countries. The sensitivity factor, however, almost certainly accounts for the absence of any reference to the negotiations with China—a subject of continuing Politburo interest that must have figured in any consideration of national security issues. The Politburo probably did not wish to send signals that could be interpreted as either high-level satisfaction or concern about the progress of these negotiations.

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Domestic Issues. Politburo discussions of domestic issues usually have been reported in greater detail than foreign policy matters, in part because many of the issues discussed do not seem to be sensitive or controversial. These elaborations appear to be designed both to demonstrate the regime's responsiveness to popular concerns and to mobilize the forces needed to implement particular programs. At the Politburo's first publicized meeting, for example, an examination of letters from Soviet workers allegedly revealed widespread popular outrage at corruption and lax labor discipline. The Politburo, supposedly responding to popular demands, stepped up its campaign against such abuses. Other complaints from workers have been treated in subsequent Politburo meetings, creating the impression of domestic agendas that have been at least partially generated from below. []

A survey of domestic issues on the agendas also reveals that this regime, like its predecessors, has been heavily preoccupied with agriculture—by far the most frequently discussed domestic topic of Politburo meetings held under Andropov. Determined to avoid a fifth consecutive poor harvest, the Politburo has been reviewing preparations for spring sowing at repeated sessions since as early as December. Progress on Brezhnev's "Food Program" and reorganization of the agro-industrial sector also have been subjects of constant scrutiny. Every detail—from fertilization and irrigation of the land to spare parts and fuel for tractors—has been examined at these meetings, and the responsible ministers have been brought in to participate in the discussions. []

Other sectors receiving individual attention have included transportation, which turned in an especially poor performance last year, and the two areas that appear to have generated the most popular criticism—housing and consumer services. The Politburo also reviewed the draft long-term energy program, one of several priority target programs designated during the Brezhnev regime—presumably moving it one step closer to approval by the Central Committee. []

The Process

The priorities suggested by the agendas differ little from those one would expect from a Politburo under Brezhnev's chairmanship. The difference lies in the

effort that is being made to implement policies that were floundering under Brezhnev. Although Brezhnev is known to have been concerned about ineffective implementation of leadership decisions (and assigned Chernenko to deal with the problem), Andropov has been adamant on the issue, publicly declaring that no new decision may be taken on a matter until the previous decision has been implemented. []

Followup. Given the Politburo's heavy emphasis on implementation, it is not surprising that its publicized discussions have set in motion immediate followup meetings, editorials, and decisions:

- When the Politburo discussed the formation of agro-industrial associations—an important part of Brezhnev's Food Program that was receiving the usual bureaucratic resistance—the meeting was followed that same day with the "retirement" of the Russian Republic's Minister of Agriculture and a week later by a reorganization of his ministry that gave the associations more authority. 25X1
- When the Politburo determined that productivity was suffering because workers were leaving their jobs during the day to shop and run personal errands, it directed the Council of Ministers to make consumer services available during off-duty hours. The Council issued a decree to that effect four days later.
- When the Politburo discussed housing shortfalls, it made the appropriate ministers "personally" responsible for correcting the situation. The issue then became the subject of a Central Committee decree, a *Pravda* editorial, and a meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. [] 25X1

The available evidence, in sum, indicates that the Politburo has been tackling problems in a more vigorous and demanding way under Andropov than it did under Brezhnev. This is suggested most persuasively by the new emphasis on implementation of decisions [] 25X1

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Figure 2
Organizations Held Accountable
for Policy Implementation^a

Number of times held accountable

National Ministries

Regional Party
(republic or below)Republic Councils
of MinistersLocal Soviet Execu-
tive CommitteesUSSR Council of
MinistersCPSU Central
Committee^a9 December 1982-21 April 1983.

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of national security to such mundane matters as traffic regulations, television repair, and the operation of dry cleaners.

Another unchanged practice is the thorough preparation and staff work typically required before items are placed on the Politburo's agenda. This requirement began with Lenin, who proposed that all materials for Politburo consideration be submitted at least a day in advance, but may not have been followed by Khrushchev, who tried to keep his Politburo colleagues off guard.

Judging from the agendas, meetings with foreign leaders have not been discussed at Politburo meetings until there have been at least two days of preparation.

Accountability. The reports of Politburo proceedings also confirm that it is the government ministries that are taking the most heat from the new regime. The Politburo's published instructions usually have made the ministries responsible for correcting shortcomings, while local party organizations have been held accountable only about half as often (see figure 2). The Central Committee apparatus and Council of Ministers' Presidium, both of which have oversight responsibilities for the ministries, have rarely been cited—possibly because some members of the Council's Presidium (Tikhonov, Aliyev, and Gromyko) and some secretaries who oversee the Central Committee departments (Dolgikh and Gorbachev) are themselves members of the Politburo.

The attack on government ministries is hardly unique, but it has taken a new form under Andropov. Although Brezhnev sometimes criticized ministers by name in his public addresses, the Andropov regime is increasing the pressure by allowing lower level officials and even factory workers to level their charges in "open letters" to the ministers. In December, *Pravda* published a letter from a group of workers to the Minister of Nonferrous Metallurgy, criticizing him for the ministry's failure to deliver the necessary materials to their plant. In March, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* printed a letter to the Minister of Tractor and Agricultural Machine Building from Soviet scientists, criticizing the ministry's failure to move a new tractor beyond the trial stage—"an inexcusable failure to give prompt support to a bold design idea."

Vestiges of the Past. Despite the innovations made under Andropov, many aspects of the decisionmaking and implementation process remain unchanged. As in the past, all kinds of decisions, including those of the most minor significance, continue to be deferred to the top—an inefficient process that places an enormous burden on the leadership. Published accounts, for example, indicate that under Andropov the Politburo has been forced to shift its attention from issues

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Issues of special complexity understandably might require more than two days. For example, the treatment of talks with Cuba's delegate to the USSR's 60th anniversary celebration—discussed a week after the Politburo had considered the talks with all other delegates—suggests that this was an issue that required special consideration and more preparation. The delegate's mission, judging by the communique issued at the conclusion of the visit, included a discussion of Soviet support for Cuban forces in southern Africa. [REDACTED]

Leadership Indicators

The Politburo agenda also may provide some clues about the strengths of its various members. The decision to publicize the agenda itself bears the mark of Konstantin Chernenko, Andropov's unofficial second secretary and onetime rival for Brezhnev's post, and suggests that his influence was strong at the time the practice was adopted. Since at least 1979, Chernenko has urged a more open style of party leadership, greater candor in public information policy, and more responsiveness to the needs of the public. The first item on the published agenda—letters from Soviet workers—also was Chernenko's special area of responsibility and a channel of information that he repeatedly extolled. Despite its association with Chernenko, the new practice—by portraying the regime as more vigorous and more responsive to citizens' concerns—has served the interests of Andropov and presumably has his full support. [REDACTED]

The agenda items sometimes also contain indirect evidence of the influence of particular leaders. For example, the Politburo's preoccupation with agriculture and Andropov's relative inexperience in that area make it likely that the leadership's chief agricultural specialist, Mikhail Gorbachev, is exercising greater influence. This is also suggested by Gorbachev's increased visibility since Brezhnev's death. It may also be significant that, of the three regional proposals approved by the Politburo thus far, two have been advanced by the Georgians, represented on the Politburo by candidate member Eduard Shevardnadze. One of these was a proposal to begin planning for a Transcaucasian railway, and the other involved a consolidation of Georgian agricultural ministries. The

success of these lobbying efforts suggests that Shevardnadze—an early Chernenko backer who now yields to no one in his praise of Andropov—has been sufficiently adroit politically to retain the support he needs for local initiatives. [REDACTED]

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Political Considerations

Although the availability of Politburo agendas provides a unique glimpse into the policymaking process, the decision to publicize the meetings was clearly based on a determination that it would serve the leadership's political interests to do so. A former Andropov consultant [REDACTED] suggested as much when asked about the publicity the meetings were receiving. "Obviously," he said, "the comrades in the Politburo have found that it serves their purpose to tell the Soviet people what the party's supreme body is doing." [REDACTED]

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As we have seen, however, "the comrades" are telling the people only what they want the people to hear. Although the communiqués probably are indicative of genuine Politburo concerns, they also have been used to communicate messages to foreign and domestic audiences. The attention devoted to East European issues, for example, undoubtedly has served to alert Bloc leaders, if they needed any reminder, to the intensity of Politburo scrutiny of their actions and sensitivity to developments in this area. In the domestic arena, the communiqués have been used to convey a sense of leadership attentiveness to issues that are of special concern to the average citizen, such as housing and consumer services, and to mobilize the forces necessary to implement important domestic policies, such as the Food Program. [REDACTED]

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Issues that would not be politically advantageous to air have generally been obscured or deleted from the communiqués. Sensitive discussions—particularly in the foreign policy area—have been described only in general terms or subsumed under the category of "other" unspecified issues. (The absence of any mention of China in the agendas is a case in point.) The

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communiques contain only vague allusions to discussions of sensitive personnel matters and give no hint of leadership debate over such potentially contentious issues as resource allocation. [REDACTED]

The limits of disclosure exclude even the identification of those attending the Politburo meetings. The published agenda identify only those who give "reports." Further, an examination of the public appearances of Politburo members based outside Moscow confirms that these leaders do not attend all Politburo meetings—largely because of the frequent travel that would be involved, but perhaps also because their presence is required only when major domestic issues are to be discussed. Full members attend more often than candidate members. [REDACTED]

Andropov himself, presumably because he is de facto chairman of the body, has not yet been listed as giving a report and until recently had never even been mentioned in the accounts. After his long absence in March 1983 sparked rumors about his health, however, that practice was revised, and his name was finally mentioned in the 31 March proceedings—after nearly four months of publicized meetings. Andropov's presence at that meeting, however, still was left ambiguous; although the Politburo "heard reports from" Tikhonov on his meetings with foreign leaders, it merely "considered and approved" the results of Andropov's meetings with visiting leaders. [REDACTED]

It is highly unlikely that more detailed accounts will be forthcoming. Even the present degree of disclosure, although currently advantageous, could eventually become troublesome to the leadership—particularly if Andropov's health should become a more serious constraint on his activities. The failure to hold a Politburo meeting on 17 March, for example, fueled rumors that Andropov was ill—despite the fact that the Politburo need not convene every Thursday and has been meeting with more regularity than it did under Brezhnev. [REDACTED]

Indeed, the new "openness" could come to an end if it ceases to serve the leadership's interest. Bovin, who may be privy to Andropov's thinking on the matter, recently implied that no further movement in this direction should be expected under his former boss. It was conceivable, he said, that more detailed accounts of Politburo activities might become available—"in 50 years' time." [REDACTED]

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